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Herbert Howells: Failure in Becoming England's next Great Composer

By

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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this paper is an investigation of Herbert Howells's life and the promise he revealed as a composer in his early years. Related objectives include: the documentation of Howells's most influential works from his early years (1912-1920); the exploration of his influences as a composer and person; the documentation of his early career as a composer; a discussion regarding Howells's stylistic 'mood creation' feature; an explanation as to why he never achieved international recognition; and finally, a study of his compositional characteristics as evidenced in a selection of his early works with an analysis of one of his lesser known madrigals "Before me, careless lying."

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¹ Howells, Herbert. *King David*. London: Winthrop Rogers; Boosey & Hawkes, 1923.

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³ Howells, Herbert. *In youth is pleasure*. Novello & Company Ltd., 1983.

⁴ Howells, Herbert. *Sing Lullaby*. London: Stainer and Bell Ltd., 1920.

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Introduction to Howells

In the early years (1912-1920) Herbert Howells was becoming a composer of considerable status. By the accounts of other highly regarded composers and music critics, Howells had before him an extremely successful career as a composer. His early years testify to his genius; they were full of vigor, charisma, daring originality and nationalistic pride. Continuing in this vein throughout the rest of his long life should have rendered him the international fame Gustav Holst, Edward Elgar, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and Charles Stanford achieved. Howells did not live up to his predecessors' expectations, however, and did not receive international acclaim during his lifetime. This paper will discuss, though not exhaustively nor solely, the early choral works of Herbert Howells in the hope of increasing understanding of the originality and promise he demonstrated in the period of 1912 to 1920.

Overview of Select Early Works (1912-1920)

By the time he was 27 (1920) Howells had composed and published works for orchestra, chamber ensemble, keyboard, voice and orchestra, songs for solo voice and sacred and secular choral pieces. He covered almost all the major genres except for opera. His largest body of composition, however, lay in the keyboard works for organ, pianoforte, and clavichord, works for accompanied and unaccompanied choir, and works for solo voice.

Howells's best known works from this period are; the *Piano Concerto in c minor* (1913); the *B's Suite* (1914-orchestra); *Psalm Preludes* (1915 and 1916-organ); *Piano Quartet in a minor* (1916); *In Gloucestershire* (1918-string quartet); Three carol anthems,

Here is the Little Door, *A Spotless Rose* and *Sing Lullaby* (1918-1920- unaccompanied mixed chorus); *Three Pieces* (1919-piano solo); *King David* (1919-solo voice); and *Blessed are the Dead* (1920-anthem for mixed double chorus).

Of less popularity are the works; *Mass in the Dorian Mode* (1912-unaccompanied mixed chorus); *Lady Audrey's Suite* (1915- string quartet); *Haec dies* (1918-unaccompanied mixed chorus); *Rhapsody*, op.17 no.1, (1915-organ) and *Rhapsody*, op.17 no.2 and 3, (1918-organ); "Even such is Time" (1913-anthem for mixed double chorus); "In youth is pleasure" (1915-unaccompanied mixed chorus); "Before me, Careless lying" (1918-unaccompanied mixed chorus); *Rhapsodic Quintet*, op.31 (1919-clarinet and strings); and *Peacock Pie* (1919-solo voice).

Howells's Education, Influence, and Career Embark

Family and Upbringing

Herbert's grandparents on his father's side were James Howells and Laura Hutchings. Laura was apparently of Scots origin and known as "the flower of the forest." It has been said that his grandmother was a very beautiful woman and it was from her that Herbert had inherited his good looks.¹ Laura and James had five children of which Oliver, Herbert's father, was the second born (b. 1854). He married Elizabeth Burgham (b. 1856) and together they had eight children of which Herbert was the youngest.² Herbert was born on October 17, 1892, in Lydney, a small west-country town in Gloucestershire. Although his surname is undoubtedly Welsh in origin, he always regarded himself as

¹ Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells* (Bridgend, Wales: Seren, 1998), 7-8.

² Spicer, 8.

being (as he put it) “true-blue English,” and musically he always inclined toward the Church of England.³

Oliver was a general decorator, painter, plumber and builder, but he was not a good business man.⁴ He eventually became bankrupt and the entire family suffered social alienation and embarrassment. This was a hard blow for the ultra-sensitive Herbert.⁵ Oliver was nevertheless a wide-ranging and intelligent man and was compelled to educate his youngest son. Oliver was passionate about art and extremely well read and, though not an accomplished musician, he had an appreciation for music and art, and through this appreciation he encouraged Herbert from the start. They would visit the great churches of the region and listen to the music of the organ and the choir and absorb the great architecture such as St. Mary Redcliffe in Bristol.⁶

Impressionable Landscape

Often, Herbert visited the job sites of his father’s business, many of which were churches. The beauty of the church architecture impressed Herbert. When he was five or six years old, he was permitted to ride the rounds with a baker, Mr. Cox, who frequently took him into the surrounding countryside. During one of these rounds, Herbert recalls having his first deep thoughts about the beauty of natural landscape and what lies behind and beyond it while witnessing a radiant November sunset.⁷ Herbert developed a general awareness and appreciation for his surroundings and had a strong companionship with the simple folk around him. These important feelings, manifest so early in his life, “. . .

³ George Guest, “Herbert Howells: A Personal Remembrance,” *Choral Journal* 33 (October 1992): 9.

⁴ Ibid, 14.

⁵ Ibid, 14.

⁶ Spicer, 15.

⁷ Robert Spearing, *H.H.: a tribute to Herbert Howells on his eightieth birthday* (London, England: Triad Press, 1972), 8.

were undoubtedly the foundation of the perceptive sensibility to human character and natural beauty which has been a mark of his life and which has been instilled into his music.”⁸

While studying at Gloucester with Brewer, Howells became acquainted with Ivor Gurney. Howells and Gurney would often go on long walks together, discussing music and English literature for days on end. They both shared a love of the Gloucestershire countryside which influenced them by far the most. Howells says,

I used to sit with Ivor Gurney on a hill half way between Gloucester and Cheltenham and from there, on a clear April day (shall we say), when the visibility was second to none, you could see the whole outline of the Malverns, he said, ‘unless that influences you for the whole of your life in tune-making, it is failing in one of its chief essentials’. And of course outlines of hills, and things, are tremendously important especially if you are born in Gloucestershire, God bless it.⁹

As mentioned before, Howells’s grandmother on his father side was of Scots origin. Palmer refers to Howells’s Celtic spirit as one of the primary forces in his life. He writes, “Celtdom implies a certain dreaminess, a remoteness, a feeling for poetic nuance, for texture, for sensuous beauty of sound: we might even sum it up as an enhanced musicality.”¹⁰ Palmer and Spicer lead us to believe that the manner in which Howells reacted to his surroundings was one of the most important aspects of his musicianship.

Teachers

Herbert’s first piano teacher was his sister Florence. After discovering that another of her pupils was more advanced than him he quit altogether. He was nine years old and for three years he would hold to this decision. Still, without formal training, he would regularly assist his father on the organ at the Baptist Chapel. When he was eleven,

⁸ Spearing, 8.

⁹ Spicer, 20.

¹⁰ Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells: A Celebration*, 2nd ed. (London: Thames Publishing, 1996), 136.

Herbert asked to join the Lydney parish church choir. By the next Sunday, he was singing, and soon he was playing the organ there too.¹¹

Herbert's early education consisted of the local Dame's School (1896-8), Lydney's Church of England Elementary School, and thereafter, he was given a scholarship to attend the local grammar school in Lydney. Staff at the school recognized Herbert's developing musical talents and put him in charge of the music for morning prayer and for providing the music for theatrical performances, composing what he had to and arranging what he needed. Through these efforts Herbert's reputation caught the attention of the local squire, Charles Bathurst. He realized Herbert's need for more training and also noted that Herbert's father, Oliver, could never afford formal lessons. In turn, the squire's sister, Mary Bathurst, paid the cost of three and a half guineas for ten weeks of piano lessons at Gloucester Cathedral, taught by Dr Herbert Brewer.

Ms Bathurst could not pay the fees indefinitely and the music lessons soon stopped as Oliver simply could not afford it. A year and half later Charles Bathurst approached Brewer on Herbert's behalf, persuading him to take the sixteen year old boy on as an Articled Pupil¹². The Articled Pupil was given a thorough grounding in musical theory, harmony and counterpoint. With this came organ tuition and training in the art of accompanying the Cathedral's services.¹³

It was during this period, 1905-1911, under the teaching of Herbert Brewer, that Howells recalls,

¹¹ Spicer, 16.

¹² The Articled Pupil was a valuable apprenticeship system for up-and-coming musicians of which has since disappeared. It holds little connection to today's 'organ scholar', which tends to be cheap way of acquiring an extra assistant without any of the applied academic associations as Brewer would have known it.

¹³ Spicer, 17.

I [Howells] had the two revelatory musical experiences of my youth. One was hearing *Messiah* in Gloucester Cathedral in 1907. The next was three years later in the same place, when the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* was performed for the first time. The Gerontius audience was kept patiently waiting for twenty minutes and at the end of it this giant of a man – the composer – left the rostrum and much to my gratification, but also embarrassment, came and sat next to me. We followed the score of Gerontius together and he left me his autograph on the proofs of some little things of mine I was carrying proudly about with me (they were the first I ever received). Afterwards Ivor Gurney and I were quite unable to sleep and we spent the night pacing the street of Gloucester. That was my first contact with Vaughan Williams.¹⁴

The impact of this music on Howells would only show evidence of effect much later in the two works, the *Elegy* for viola solo, string quartet and strings (1917-written in the memory of friend and fallen soldier Purcell Warren), and ‘Master Tallis’s Testament’ for organ (from *Six Pieces for Organ*, 1940).¹⁵

In 1911, at the age of eighteen, Howells left Brewer and spent a year at home, for financial reasons and also to compose works to submit in application for a scholarship to the Royal College of Music (RCM). During this year, he dedicated time to composition and wrote the *Six Summer Idyls* (piano), *Organ Sonata in c minor*, op.1, and *Cycle of Five Songs*, op.2, (low voice),¹⁶ These works granted him an open scholarship at the RCM and the opportunity to study with Charles Stanford. His studies began on 6 May 1912. His teacher for music history and literature was the Director, Sir Hubert Parry. For composition, he was taught by Sir Charles Stanford. Charles Wood taught him harmony and counterpoint; Sir Walter Parratt, organ; and Sir Wolford Davies, choral techniques.¹⁷

¹⁴ Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells: A Study* (Sevenoaks: Novello, 1978), 11.

¹⁵ Spicer, 23.

¹⁶ Spicer, 25-26.

¹⁷ Spicer, 31.

About the Pieces for Scholarship

The *Organ Sonata in c minor* reveals some of the characteristics of Howells's writing at the time, and some of the traits that would be with him his entire life. Paul Spicer, an organist, composer and leading authority on Howells suggests Elgar, and his *Gerontius*, to be the principal influence on Howells. Other traits Spicer mentions are Howells's gift for improvisation, the use of pedal point, and his practice of note-spinning his way around a 'block' of inspiration. Spicer asserts that his intention is not to imply 'that he couldn't write a tune' but that he (Howells) would naturally write contrapuntally. The fugue, in the Organ Sonata, is a 'demonstration of the kind of technical know-how which marked him out right from the start as one of the leading musical minds of his generation.'¹⁸

Cycle of Five Songs for low voice is Howells's first song-cycle. The songs were written quickly between 30 August and 21 September, 1911 for Dorothy Dawe, who would, nine years later, become Howells's wife. It is apparent that Howells completed these in 'a white heat of inspiration.'¹⁹ Spicer comments, 'It is almost as if he has been liberated by being able to take his music out of church.'²⁰ Howells's source of inspiration was, of course, this beautiful young woman with whom he hoped to form some type of relationship. Howells was already engaged to another woman at this point but had no problem in fostering Dorothy's attention. Again, the music in these songs is heavily influenced by Elgar. In "The Devotee," 'the music takes on the same three-part texture and the thirds/sixths meanderings which Elgar gives the orchestra to accompany the Angel close to the start of Part 2 of *The Dream of Gerontius*, and the voice begins with

¹⁸ Ibid, 26.

¹⁹ Ibid, 26.

²⁰ Ibid, 28.

that same falling semitone figure which is a feature of that section.²¹ In the fourth song, “The Sorrow of Love,” Howells recreates a moment from *Gerontius* in which Elgar writes for Gerontius to sing whilst being accompanied by ‘a widely spaced and richly-scored first inversion G major chord.’ With Howells the effect is perhaps even richer and the phrase returns three times.²²

The general mood of these pieces is one of sadness and, to some extent pathos, and from this there is little relief. This type of writing, that excites sadness, is something Howells admits to. It is, “a quality which has moved me more than any other in music – even since boyhood”. He gives examples of three works which influenced him in his upbringing; the Vaughan Williams *Tallis Fantasia*; Delius’s *Sea Drift* and Brahms’s *Third Symphony*.²³

Hodgson notes that ““Parts of *Sea Drift*”, he said, “are (for me) the saddest I’ve ever heard. The Brahms’ coda (last movement) is not quite the same thing, but it is (like Vaughan Williams’s ending to his Fifth Symphony) a sort of benediction upon the work as a whole”.²⁴ The thick textures and harmonic colour of these songs give us another aspect of Howells’s method of composition

²¹ Ibid, 28.

²² Ibid, 28.

²³ Ibid, 29.

²⁴ Peter John Hodgson, “The Music of Herbert Howells” (Ph.D., University of Colorado at Boulder, 1970), 8.

The Early Years - Taking Root; Growth and Expectations

The Royal College of Music (RCM) lay in South Kensington. This was a good distance away from the comforts of Howells's country town, Lydney; but Howells was surrounded by other good students and taught by outstanding teachers. Ivor Gurney had been at the school a year before him, and Howells quickly found other friends such as Arthur Bliss and Arthur Benjamin. His principal teachers were Charles Villiers Stanford, the loveable Irishman with the notorious temper which Howells never experienced; Charles Wood another Irishman whom Howells described as "the most completely equipped teacher in my experience"; and Hubert Parry, of whom Howells later said "Hubert Parry? I could talk for ten years about Hubert Parry!" Parry was a multi-versed, remarkable man with exemplary skills in politics, composing and in educating. He was also a Gloucestershire man. These men, and others, sensed Howells was the leading musician of his generation, and that his education should be nurtured with care. Had they lived long enough to see his future, they would have been, in some respects, disappointed.²⁵

Howells's first assignment from Stanford was to visit the recently built Westminster Cathedral to hear R.R. Terry's choir. Terry led the revival of Renaissance polyphony in the early twentieth century and was the first conductor of his time to perform the masses of Byrd, Tye, and Tallis liturgically. He also encouraged new compositions from principal composers of the day and held very high standards of musicianship for his choir. Howells responded very quickly to what he witnessed at the cathedral and within weeks he had written his *Missa Sine Nomine*, or *Mass in the Dorian Mode*.

²⁵ Spicer, 33.

The *Mass in the Dorian Mode* was written in May/June 1912 and impressed his teacher so much that it was performed the following October. It is a fascinating piece because of the extreme purity of style and Stanford immediately recognized that his new pupil had a talent in writing for the human voice, which is appreciated to this day.

In 1913 Howells went on to write and dedicate his *Piano Concerto in C minor* to Arthur Benjamin. In July 1914 the *Piano Concerto* was premiered at the Queen's Hall. The piece was conducted and premiered by Stanford with Arthur Benjamin at the piano. Unfortunately Howells withdrew the work after it received its "murder by critics". Of the manuscript, which is kept at the RCM, the last several pages are missing. The speculation is that Howells removed them in plans of revision in 1971 but was unsuccessful in this task. Howells was extremely sensitive and reacted badly to criticism. This trait would be with him all his life and is perhaps the reason so few of his works for orchestra and chamber ensemble are known today.²⁶

Also, in 1913, came the choral work "Even Such is Time," scored for eight voices (SATB, SATB). This unpublished sonnet for double choir, was, "according to Howells's own penciled note on the manuscript, in 1913 as 'Student Homework for Dr. Charles Wood' – his harmony and counterpoint professor at the college."²⁷ Its style links it to Stanford's *Three English Motets* (1913), and Sir Hubert Parry's swan-song, the *Songs of Farewell* (1913-1915).

In 1914, Howells wrote the *B's suite for Orchestra*. The work is not in homage to Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, or even Bruckner, but rather one in regard to his own friends. The first movement, B, *Bublum* is himself, the second, *Bartholomew*, to Gurney, and the

²⁶ Spicer, 37

²⁷ Patrick Russill, Program notes to, *Howells: Choral Work*, The Finzi Singers directed by Paul Spicer (Essex, England: Chandos Records Ltd, 9458, 1996).

following three, *Blissy*, *Bunny*, and *Benjee*, to Arthur Bliss, Purcell Warren (a distinguished viola student of whom Herbert was extremely fond), and Arthur Benjamin.²⁸

In 1915, Howells composed His *Lady Audrey's Suite* for string quartet, made up of four short dance-like movements, each prefaced by a short poem giving the movement its character. In the same year he composed *Three Dances for violin and orchestra* for a very young and gifted fellow student, George Whittaker.²⁹ These pieces are “a real romance, full of youthful warm-bloodedness and a quieter, more level-headed passion.”³⁰

This ‘warm-bloodedness and level-headed passion’ can be interpreted with Spicer’s words especially when one considers the *Op. 17 Rhapsodies* (1915-1918-organ) or compares them with the *Psalms Preludes* (1915-1916-organ). “The essential difference is not a stylistic one, nor the fact that there is a quiet opening, a dramatic build-up and a falling away to a peaceful end. Rather, there is no programmatic element. This is absolute music, and these pieces underline a principle which governs almost all Howells’s music from about 1913 when one might detect the beginning of a personal style, that of ‘mood creation’.

Although experiencing success and praise in his composing, Howells was also in the gripes of undiagnosed Graves disease.³¹ He was always exhausted, and his eyes were giving him serious problems. He attributed these ailments to his desire to make the most

²⁸ Spearing, 11.

²⁹ Abandoned after their first performance and discovered by Paul Spicer and first recorded for the BBC in 1989.

³⁰ Spicer, 39.

³¹ Graves' disease represents a basic defect in the immune system, causing production of immunoglobulins (antibodies) which stimulate and attack the thyroid gland, causing growth of the gland and overproduction of thyroid hormone. Similar antibodies may also attack the tissues in the eye muscles and in the pretibial skin (the skin on the front of the lower leg). Treatment consists of Anti-thyroid drugs, radioactive iodine, or removal of most of the thyroid gland.

of all his opportunities and his propensity to over work. Despite this illness, which caused his heart to race and eyeballs to protrude, in July 1916 he sat and passed the Fellowship examination of the Royal College of Organist's. Through the insistence and financial support of Hubert Parry, Howells was eventually diagnosed and treated. He was given six months to live. Ironically, the war machine claimed Howells's friends' lives, but not his own; he was saved from death in the trenches of World War I by his sickness. Howells was now given the opportunity to help in the advancement of medical science, by agreeing to take an experimental drug as yet untried. So, twice a week and for two years, Howells traveled to St Thomas's Hospital to be the first human being to ever receive radiotherapy with radioactive iodine. The recuperation was long and painfully slow and when he was not undergoing treatment he was at home in Lydney, staying in bed for days with his mother watching over him. Through this difficult period (1915-1918) Howells never stopped composing in spite of the entreaties of his teachers and peers.

In February 1916 Howells wrote his *Piano Quartet in a minor* Spicer praises this work, stating that it is; "by far Howells's most important chamber work to date, and is still regarded as one of the most significant works by a British composer of the period," and, "Of all Howells's early works this is the one which stakes out his territory and which marks him out as a composer of style, technique, inspiration and substance."³² Under Stanford's recommendation, the piece was submitted for consideration by the trustees of the newly founded *Carnegie Trust Fund Musical Works Scheme* who funded the publication of a number of major new works. Howells considered this an elite club to which he could not aspire and was surprised when he discovered that his was the only

³² Spicer, 46-47.

unknown name to appear in the first list of works to be published by the Carnegie Trust in April of 1917. The Trust would play another important role in Howells's life in the near future, and on a much more personal basis.

Howells was coming to the natural close of his time spent at the RCM, and he would soon need to find work outside its cozy walls. He was well regarded at the college and was offered the post of assistant organist at Salisbury Cathedral by Walter Alcock in February 1917. However, Howells's disease was still considered life-threatening and although he saw in Salisbury a new inspiration for his creativity, he was forced to leave this post only a few months later due to the severity of his illness, and his successful years at the RCM were now over.³³

Now penniless, Howells was forced to rely on the generosity of his friends, teachers and family. Help came unexpectedly from the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust. It is well-known that the influence of the Trust helped establish Howells's reputation. What is less known "is the role of the Trust in giving Howells financial support at a time of great personal distress in return for work on its other major musical project, the transcription, editing and publishing of the ten volume series, *Tudor Church Music*."³⁴ A thorough investigation in and around the event of the Trust's giving Howells a 'grant' is well documented by Paul Andrews in his article "A matter of national importance: Herbert Howells and the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust."

The appeal to the Trust led by Trust adjudicator, W. H. Hadow. The other two adjudicators for the Carnegie Trust in its first act as a new music publishing fund were D

³³ Spicer notes Howells' list of awards during his time at the RCM. Eight awards in total and six times winning a History essay prize – Howells was also a gifted writer of well argued prose.

³⁴ Paul Andrews, "A matter of national importance: Herbert Howells and the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust," *Organists Review* 81 (February 1995): 32.

F Tovey, and H P Allen. Hadow's remarks (and those of the other two adjudicators) were very positive for the *Piano Quartet*. Their joint comment reads, "A real masterpiece by a young composer who possesses undoubted genius, and whose work, already astonishingly mature, gives promise of a great musical career."³⁵ (Adjudicators for Howells's second attempt at the fund, with his *Rhapsodic Quintet for clarinet and strings* in 1920, were Hadow again, Granville Bantock the composer, and Dan Godfrey the conductor.³⁶)

The answers to the Trusts involvement regarding Howells's grant lies in the minutes of the Carnegie Trust Committee meetings between June 1917 and February 1920, and it contains reference to Howells's illness. As he was obliged to resign from his tenure at Salisbury Cathedral after only a few months and had no other means of income, the minutes contain a letter from W H Hadow concerning Howells's position. It is a plea for the Trust to give financial assistance to allow the suffering composer to recover without having to worry about income. This is a testimony to Howells's abilities and gives an indication of the high esteem in which his potential as a composer was held by the highest musical authorities of the time.

An extract from the letter reads,

...in all my experience I do not think that I have ever come across any young English musician of such remarkable promise. The work which he submitted to the Carnegie Trust [at this date only the Piano Quartet had been seen] was of very high quality and the enquiries which I have since been making have only strengthened my conviction that if he lives he has a great future... I am not asking for his sake so much as for the sake of future British Art, to which, if I am not wholly mistaken, he is better able to contribute than any man of his age now living... his case would be supported in terms not less warm than mine by Parry, Stanford, Allen, Bantock, Terry and every musician in the country who has seen his work... I do most sincerely hope that you

³⁵ Ibid 32.

³⁶ Ibid 34.

will be able to do something for a man on whom so much of the future of British music seems to me to depend.³⁷

To avoid an awkward precedent, rather than just giving a free grant, the Trust suggested that Howells should be employed by Terry for a decent salary in connection with the editing of the Tudor manuscripts. Terry welcomed this suggestion and the annual salary Howells would receive commencing on August 3, 1917, was set at £150. The Trust also instructed Terry to inform Howells that, "... the trustees did not wish him to knock himself up over it [the work] and that he must do it at his complete leisure."³⁸ This arrangement continued until early 1920. However, Howells was now recovering his health and he no longer wanted this type of work. The Trust reconvened on the matter and came to the conclusion that Howells would be temporarily employed as a teacher at the RCM to while he looked for permanent posting. On March 31, 1920, he was paid, in advance, the sum of £300 for two years work. In 1980, Howells finally relinquished this 'temporary' post, after nearly 60 full years of service.

It is extremely revealing to see the amount of hope and faith these musicians in high circles placed on Howells. And it is not difficult to understand why. At this point in his life (1920) he was an intelligent, respected and revered composer. By this time, he had finished writing his second *Violin Sonata* in E flat (1917), a *Puck's Minuet* (1917-orchestral miniature), his *Rhapsody*, op.17, no.3 (1918-organ), his "Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis in G" (1918-mixed choir and organ), and his world-wide popular three carol anthems for unaccompanied mixed choir "Here is the little door" (1918), "Sing Lullaby" (1919), and "A Spotless Rose" (1920). "With these miniature masterpieces, Howells nailed his true colours to the mast and staked his claim to be Stanford's linear successor

³⁷ Ibid 35.

³⁸ Ibid, 34.

in the highly sophisticated process of revolutionizing the music of the Anglican Church.”³⁹ In 1920 Howells married Dorothy Dawe, the woman whom he had been courting for 9 years and had dedicated his *Cycle of Five Songs*, op.2. The year 1920 also brought a host of changes for Howells and a move away from total commitment to his composing. But first a closer look at Howells’s influence, style, and a few select choral pieces.

Mood Creation

In his early period, Howells shows exemplary command not only of technique, but also of the kind of mood or ‘sound world’ he wants to occupy. To some listeners the texture may seem thick and it is true that Howells uses the orchestra fully, but in doing so he created his own ‘orchestra palette’.

Carter gives vital points regarding Howells’s influence and how his Celtic ancestry and sensibility to beauty manifest themselves. Carter quotes Palmer, “Howells saw his spirituality – and realized his musicality – in terms of three A’s – Architecture, Acoustic, Association,” and goes on to quote Howells’s program notes for a 1966 Winchester Cathedral performance: “[the] ‘nearly-possible translation of the frozen poetry of Architecture into the living immemorial sounds of voices in consort’.”⁴⁰ Song, melody, line, and in Howells case many lines that run together, intersect and hold the structure securely like the column’s and ribs of a cathedral ceiling. His music is derived from that

³⁹ Spicer, 67.

⁴⁰ Palmer, 146.

location, architecture and atmosphere itself.⁴¹ Out of this comes, “strange and wonderful chords which are probably Howells’s most conspicuous identity badge.”⁴²

A second major aspect of Howells’s music is his association with mood. Hodgson writes of Howells’s mood creation, ‘...its primary purpose the realization of an aesthetic unity of mood or psychological climate, rather than the development of symphonic argument of the investigation of dramatic conflict.’⁴³

Howells’s association with mood can be broken down into three primary components: the elegiac, the mystic (or remote), and the soberly gay.⁴⁴ One of Howells’s most persistent moods, the elegiac, is both melancholic and nostalgic. This frame of mind can be seen in works such as, the *Elegy for Viola and Strings* (1917), the *Psalm Preludes for Organ* (1915), and most notably the solo song “King David” (1919).⁴⁵

The *Elegy* was written in memory of Howells’s close friend and fellow student at the RCM. Francis Purcell Warren (‘Bunny’ of ‘The B’s’) was killed at the battle of Mons in 1917. “King David,” on the text of Walter de la Mare’s poem, became one of Howells’s most successful songs. The mood of the song, the king’s sorrow, moves progressively from one of sadness to one of freedom of sadness; not elated happiness, but release from sorrow into peace. A look at the piano’s introductory phrase can tell us much of the grief the King must have been feeling.

⁴¹ Jeffrey R. Carter, “Consistency and Change in the Sacred Choral Anthems of Herbert Howells,” *Choral Journal* 42 (March 2002), 12.

⁴² Palmer, 147

⁴³ Hodgson, 166.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

Figure 1



King David, mm. 1-3

Merely two chords, but within it can be sensed the extent of the King's grief. The ninth, unresolved and doubled in the tenor, produces the bitter-sweet clash of the minor second. This dissonance in Howells's vocabulary almost always constitutes an expression of grief. These two chords make up the sole harmonic basis of the first section. It is repetitive, does not develop harmonically, and expresses the emotional deadlock of the King.⁴⁶ Howells's ability to express the elegiac comes by no coincidence. It comes via many of life's unfortunate experiences.

Howells experienced a number of deaths that affected him profoundly. Within a year of each other two people who meant very much to Howells, and who were both in their own way fathers to him, passed away. Hubert Parry died on 21 October 1918; Oliver Howells died on 21 September 1919. After Oliver Howells's business failed, and caused (as he saw it) disgrace upon the family, Oliver was never the same, and his health and spirit slowly declined. Herbert Howells's method of coming to terms with such loss was the composition of several choral works, large and small. An even more profound reaction to death came years later when Howells's own son, Michael, age nine, died in 1935 of polio, resulting in his composition of the formidable *Hymnus Paradisi*.

⁴⁶ Palmer, 41.

The mood of remoteness is less easy to define in terms of stylistic procedure. In 1923 Katherine Eggar described this aspect of Howells's when she stated: "That, I should say, was the most English of all. It is that in is as a nation which must account for our amazing literary history that hold upon the deep things of the mind which persists in our tradition, in spite of all out levity, our gullible ness, our commercialism, our stupidity, our superficial contempt for learning. Some might say that the 'remoteness' in Howells's music is due to his looking back to the past in music; others, nearer the point, might say that the quality of the music to which he looks back is also 'remoteness.'"⁴⁷

Evans also describes Howells's 'mood' as a distinguishing quality and also remarks on the same characteristic mood of 'remoteness.' "There are moments when the poetical feeling becomes so meditative that it seems to pass beyond the influence of purely musical considerations, but it appears the composer is alive to this, for, having plunged us for a moment into this dim remoteness, he quickly leads us back and concentrates our interest on the main course of the music."⁴⁸ Evans confirms the difficulty in illustrating the mood of remoteness by stating, "its very nature almost precludes definition."⁴⁹

A brief analysis of the *Violin Sonata No.1* can summarize the atmosphere of remoteness. It is featured by: very soft dynamics; fluidic rhythm and tonal schemes; a sustained harmonic accompaniment that becomes less and less assertive as the movement closes; and a cadence of excessive length diminishing to barely audible levels. The violinist is also instructed to play with mute and is widely removed in range from the

⁴⁷ Katherine E. Eggar, "An English Composer: Herbert Howells," *The Music Teacher*, vol. 15 (1923), 214; quoted in Hodgson, 171.

⁴⁸ Edwin Evans, "Modern British Composers: VIII Herbert Howells," *The Musical Times*, vol.61 (March, 1920), p. 156.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 156.

piano in the middle of the movement.⁵⁰ Palmer suggests Howells creates the effect of distance through harmonic parameter. “Subtle harmonic inflections and progressions suggest perspectives of distance . . . where the shift from major to minor was unobtrusively inserted; or . . . where the composer employed two consecutive major “six-four” chords on successive tones a whole-step apart in an ascending direction; or . . . where the immediate context suggests a fleeting major mode on A with the raised fourth superimposed--always a sure sign of Howells’ misty distances!”⁵¹

Attached to the effect of harmonic parameter is the concept of intervallic relationship. Again, these features can be summarized as: a preference for a modally inflected tonality, specifically aspects of the Lydian and Mixo-Lydian modes which he used in a type of synthetic configuration. This employed the raised fourth and flattened seventh, sometimes the flattened second of the Phrygian mode, and in combination with a diatonic major or minor mode.⁵²

The raised fourth, or the tri-tone aspect of the Lydian mode, is found several times in the *Violin Sonata No.1*. The peculiar colour of the raised fourth also occurs in other notable choral works such as *Hymnus Paradisi* and the *Missa Sabrinensis*.⁵³ Although Howells’s ‘mood’ is greatly influenced by modes and their combinations, it is worthwhile noting that Howells was sometimes impatient with the unqualified term ‘modal’ when speaking of twentieth century procedures. He writes of Vaughan Williams’ *Concerto Accademico*, “The heart of the concerto is its slow movement (and ‘Adagio,’ in triple time). Harmonically it is what is vaguely called ‘modal.’ That term may be held to cover

⁵⁰ Hodgson, 174

⁵¹ Ibid. 174.

⁵² Ibid, 175-176.

⁵³ Ibid, 176.

and describe what some hold to be the unnatural and wicked offence of the minor seventh. If there were nothing here but a mindless sequence of the triads G minor--F major--G minor, this movement would be worth no more than the cheap imitations it will assuredly have during the next three years.”⁵⁴

A third major aspect in Howells’s musicianship is his spiritual connection with Tudor composers. In many interviews Howells remarks on his affinity with the Tudor period. Speaking with Christopher Palmer he said, “all through my life I’ve had this strange feeling that I belonged somehow to the Tudor Period – not only musically but in every way. Ralph Vaughan Williams even had a theory that I was the reincarnation of one of the lesser Tudor luminaries.”⁵⁵ Howells never embraced popular devices of composition such as twelve-tone technique or serialism (although he did teach the principles involved as an intellectual method at the RCM – and later gave a series of BBC lectures on its practical application).⁵⁶ But for Howells, Serialism was stylistically inappropriate for his own music; rather, he enjoyed the antiquated style of earlier composers and was extremely influenced by plainsong and Tudor conventions of phraseology, figuration and texture, but he did not conform to Tudor harmonic practice.⁵⁷ Howes calls the result, “impressionistic counterpoint in that the part-writing has not the firm outlines, the cogent logic and the clearly determined progression which are the usual features of a contrapuntal style, but instead fluid themes, half-hearted imitations and quasi-extemporizations for melodic lines.”⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Ibid, 177, quoting Herbert Howells, “Vaughan Williams’s ‘Concerto Accademico’,” *The Dominant* (March 1928): 26.

⁵⁵ Palmer, A Study, 11

⁵⁶ Nicholas Webber, “Herbert Howells: 1892-1983,” *The American Organist* 17 (June 1983): 33.

⁵⁷ Carter, 12

⁵⁸ Frank Howes, *The English Musical Renaissance* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1966), 301.

After 1920 - The Decline from Composition and Growth into Teaching

Spicer categorizes the years 1919-1926 as turbulent ones for Howells. It was a busy period filled with much personal growth and development. Besides the preparations for his upcoming marriage to Dorothy Dawe on August 3, 1920, Howells was busy writing music and fulfilling the obligations of his appointment to the teaching staff of the Royal College in April, 1920. From 1925 to 1928, he also held a teaching engagement at Morley College, London. Spicer draws a connection between the literal end of Howells's honeymoon following his wedding and that of his carefree youth. Further, his total focus on composition came to an end.⁵⁹

“At this point, despite the outward happiness of his life, a small flag should be hung at half mast to mark the moment at which other pressures begin to crowd his career, to such an extent that he was never really to fulfill that promise which Sir Henry Hadow had so eloquently hoped would see him leading the pack of British composers, and in which Stanford had invested so much faith. It is a serious moment, for despite undisputed masterpieces to come, there is no doubt that as a composer Howells never really fulfilled the great hopes invested in him and for which he was uniquely equipped, however outwardly successful his professional life might have appeared.”⁶⁰

Many sources blatantly suggest that Howells fell short of becoming a major force in the international compositional circuit. Explanations for this opinion are numerous. There is even a documented case where Howells's future is prophesized. In 1919 Howells wrote to Ivor Gurney, who was fighting in the Great War, to tell him of his good fortune with his new musical career at Salisbury. Spicer illustrates the contempt Gurney felt for Howells in this period and gives evidence of strained relations between the two. Stephen Banfield further illustrates this point using the following quote from a letter

⁵⁹ Spicer, 74.

⁶⁰ Spicer, 74.

Gerald Finzi wrote to the composer Robin Milford (quoted in Joy Finzi's biography of her husband).

"Who will ever know that so far from Gurney & Howells having been great friends - & any article by Marion Scott & even several loyal articles by Howells himself go to show this - that Gurney had the greatest contempt for Howells. J.W. Haines, who knew them well in Gloucester, says that Gurney used to say 'Oh, Howells will just get married, & that will be the end of him, and a Dr of music which is what he is best fitted for.' Both of these tragic prophecies seem to have come true..."⁶¹

Gerald Finzi also commented on Howells's early years as, ". . . those vintage years between 1916 and 1919, when he was in his middle twenties, and which produced a body of work much of which seems to remain evergreen." He goes on to say,

"There is no gainsaying that, for a number of years which followed [after 1920], Howells reputation as a composer was dimmed and there may have been some justification for this. Thomas Hardy has spoken of 'the age at which the clear spirit bids goodbye to the last infirmity of noble mind and takes to house-hunting and investments' and it is no uncommon thing for the creative element to be subdued by the practical needs of life."⁶²

Banfield further observes that "Elsewhere Finzi acknowledged Howells's career constraints and viewed him in just the same way as most of his contemporaries must have done during the apparently fallow decades after the debacle of his Second Piano Concerto in 1925, as 'the brilliant young composer with a great future behind him.'"⁶³ Finzi, in his article on Howells, does give the overworked composer some credit as he continues with the afore-mentioned quote noting that, "the brilliant young composer with a great future behind him is a common enough experience and might have become the fate of Howells if his brilliance had not been based on something more than adolescent emotion." He

⁶¹ Stephen Banfield, *Gerald Finzi: An English Composer* (London: Faber and Faber limited, 1997), 64.

⁶² Gerald Finzi, "Notes from the Underground: Gerald Finzi commends the music of Herbert Howells," *Musical Times* (December 1997): 28.

⁶³ Banfield, 64.

continues to say, “ Although Howells’s creative life ran underground it by no means ceased.”⁶⁴ He speaks highly of his *Lambert’s Clavichord*, but then criticizes his *Six Organ Pieces* with the comment ‘Howells’s fugal expositions are sometimes so dead’. Moments later he praises Howells’s contrapuntal mastery and hails it as “mainstream of his splendid choral writing.” He concludes by hailing the *Hymnus Paradisi* as the zenith of Howells’s creative power and his emergence into daylight again.⁶⁵ Finzi’s comments relegated Howells to the ranks of ‘has beens’ but also praised him as a composer perhaps returning to new heights of power. Despite this optimistic prediction, the works still did not flow as they had in his youth, nor did he write as much for large scale secular genres.

Table 1 displays Howells’s writing pattern over his lifetime. The first five genres, save extended secular choral (with orchestra), infer a prosperous and expanding repertoire. However, they are all within the sacred category. Columns three and five (Anthems and Motets, and, Canticles and Hymns) were written for and performed in churches and were intended for liturgical use, thus limiting exposure to the general public in the concert hall.

Howells did write for the concert hall but it is interesting to note how the ‘solo’ genres (the Solo Song Cycles and Song Sets, Single Songs, Organ Works, Clavichord Works, Pianoforte Works, and a portion of the Chamber Music - sonatas) are prominent throughout his life. There is little mention in the literature of the premieres of Howells’s solo works. Thus we are left to surmise that these works were first performed at small, inauspicious recitals where attendance was small and critics were unlikely to be in attendance. Thus, both Howells’s sacred and solo works were shielded from the critical, public ear. One can speculate that this may have been a result of Howells’s fear of public

⁶⁴ Finzi, 29.

⁶⁵ Finzi, 29.

failure. There is evidence to support this claim. Webber notes that, “Hardly any of Howells’s early instrumental works have survived the shifting tastes of a fickle concert-going public-although it should be noted that many of them from this period [1915-1930] were designed, like much of Walton’s music of similar vintage, for small and select audiences of friends. The mature instrumental compositions, too, seem relegated to indecent obscurity.”⁶⁶

Table 1. Number of Compositions by Genre per Years

	1892-1920	1921-1935	1936-1950	1951-1965	1966-1983
Extended Sacred Choral (with Orchestra)	1	3	2	5	1
Extended Secular Choral (with Orchestra)	1	1	0	0	0
Anthems and Motets	14	3	11	2	29
Part songs and Unison Songs	10	29	8	10	0
Canticles and Hymns	4	8	9	9	22
Solo Song Cycles and Song Sets	9	5	0	0	0
Single Songs	24	4	1	3	0
Organ Works	8	1	10	4	7
Clavichord Works	0	1 (set of 1-12)	0	3 (vol. 1+)	0
Pianoforte Works	14	12	2	1	2
Chamber Music	12	5	5	0	0
Orchestral and Brass Band Music	8 (all Orchestral)	7*(6 Orchestral, 1 Brass)	7(6 Orchestral, 1 Brass)	1 (Brass)	1 (Fanfare)

Source: Hodgson, 245-301. Paul Andrews: ‘Herbert Howells’, *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy; available from <http://www.grovemusic.com/login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca>; Internet; accessed 21 September 2004. Notes: Hodgson’s works list on Howells was issued with his dissertation in 1970. Since Howells lived until 1983 Grove Music Online was used to finish the list. In cases where the two sources were inconsistent regarding date of composition, Grove online was used. In cases where works were absent from one or the other source, the two were compiled. * One Orchestral piece, written in the late 30’s for violin cello and an incomplete orchestra, Christopher Palmer completed the orchestral parts in 1992.

⁶⁶ Nicholas Webber, “Herbert Howells 1892-1983,” *The American Organist* 17 (June 1983): 33.

Speculation aside, one can look into Howells's life in these 'turbulent' times and see the activity and turmoil that interfered with his composing. In 1920 Howells signed on as an examiner for the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music. For the next three years, although still regaining his strength from his ordeal with Grave's disease, the Board sent him on two foreign examining tours. He first went to South Africa in 1921, and then to Canada in 1923. The trips were musically fruitful, especially the latter, during which he composed the *Violin Sonata No.3 in E minor* (in response to his wonder at the awesome scale of the Canadian Rockies).

Due to his busy schedule, Howells's next major works were written in 1922 (*Procession*: large orchestra op.36⁶⁷ and *Sine nomine*: Canata for soli, chorus and orchestra op.34), 1923 (*Pastoral Rhapsody*), 1924 (*Piano Concerto*: No. 2 in c minor op.39), 1926-1927 (*Lambert's Clavichord*: 12 pieces for clavichord [or piano] op.41), and in 1933 (*A Kent Yeoman's Wooing Song*: Cantata for sop. and bar. soli, chorus and orchestra). Other works were composed in this time frame but without the same vigor for quantity or even substance, as in his former, more youthful years.

The orchestral pieces *Pastoral Rhapsody* and the *Piano Concerto* No. 2, op.39 are both works Howells withdrew from publication after their first performances. Herein lies a strong cause for Howells's decline from the spotlight: he was incredibly sensitive to public opinion.

As mentioned earlier, his first *Piano Concerto* took a beating from the press, leaving Howells to describe it as "unduly pompous," removing it entirely from the public eye forever. However, this work impressed Eaglefield Hull, who 'felt it to be "a magnificent

⁶⁷ Originally conceived for orchestra in 1917, Howells waited until 1922 before he felt was sufficiently equipped and confident to translate the piano score into orchestral – Spicer, 66.

work, well worth ranking by those of Rachmaninov which we hear so frequently”⁶⁸ Gurney, too, loved the work and spoke very highly of it. In this early instance, we see evidence of Howells’s inability to cope with even the slightest criticism. The *Piano Concerto* No.2 was also short-lived and proved to be disastrous to Howells’s delicate psyche. Its debut performance, sharing the stage with Vaughan Williams’s *Pastoral Symphony*, was well received and deemed highly successful. Apart from the soloist, Harold Samuel, and another man who shouted during the applause, ‘Well thank God that’s over,’ the work was well received, especially by Vaughan Williams.⁶⁹ However, Howells was wounded by these few adverse comments, and despite the fact that the work was at proof stage with the publisher, he instantly withdrew it.

The reaction to this Concerto “was a defining moment in Howells’s life. It was the first time that he had taken a really serious knock, and the way in which he reacted proved that he was psychologically ill-equipped to cope with adverse criticism.”⁷⁰ Following this encounter, Howells appeared to be in a crisis of confidence, writing only the few works mentioned above, various solo works and revisions of some earlier compositions. It was *Lambert’s Clavichord*, written between 1926 and 1927, that gave Howells a renewed sense of confidence and trust in his natural alliance with the Tudor period. It was his own soundscape conveying ‘mood’ and even, certain ‘abstractness’ with his contrapuntal style at the heart of the piece.

⁶⁸ Spicer, 37.

⁶⁹ Harold Samuel disliked the work from the beginning and tried to persuade the Royal Philharmonic Society to release him from the engagement – in turn they refused him. The man with the outburst was a music critic called Robert Lorenz. Howells reasons for his actions were more political than personal.

⁷⁰ Spicer, 82.

Howells's compositional procedure naturally lent itself to contrapuntal writing.

Lambert's Clavichord (1927) illustrates in marked degree his preference for contrapuntal style.⁷¹ In comparison with his mentor, Vaughan Williams, Hodgson writes,

Howells' compositional aptitudes differed again from those of the senior composer in two especially important respects: the symphonic-dramatic and the contrapuntal. Vaughan Williams' creative imagination lent itself naturally to symphonic development and dramatic intensification: Howells' did not. Vaughan Williams was demonstrably happy in the larger symphonic media (nine symphonies and several concerti), as well as in the dramatic choral medium (four operas and a morality); Howells was not. In matters contrapuntal, Vaughan Williams was generally content with less purely linear and more harmonic blocking procedures than Howells whose compositional methods seemed to stem largely from carefully calculated intervallic counterpoint.⁷²

Howells was a busy man, freshly married and hot in demand as a clinician, adjudicator, and lecturer. Although his attention was diverted from composition, Foss suggests another reason for Howells's lack of success within his own lifetime. The qualities found within *Lambert's Clavichord* and the *Organ Sonata* (1933) confirm Foss's opinion that they characterized Howells's "most brilliant" compositional style. This style being a quality of abstraction and in some cases "atonal."⁷³ In 1930, Foss felt the need to express an opinion supporting Howells's output of music which he described as "atonal." He concluded that Howells's abstract pattern music, rather than his English music, with its lyricism, harmonic euphony, gentle dissonance, and modal inflection, afforded the greatest promise for future development. It was in his more abstract style, Foss suggested, that Howells would have opportunity to gain more than merely local recognition. It was Howells's own "Englishness," Foss regretted, that seemed to restrict

⁷¹ Hodgson, 179.

⁷² Hodgson, 179.

⁷³ Hubert J. Foss, "Herbert Howells: A Brief Survey of His Music," *The Musical Times*, 71 (December 1930): 114.

the composer's utilization of the then contemporary avant-garde procedures, thus "hindering Howells from securing the greater international attention he might otherwise have enjoyed."⁷⁴ He goes on to say, "In my opinion, the greatest possibilities in Howells' future lie in his capacity for writing abstract music."⁷⁵

Purposefully abstract music and serialism were, by and large, rejected by Howells in his work. Howells's artistic stance on structure concerning intervallic relationships and their harmonic consequences seems to be the cause of his 'non-acceptance of the dodecaphonic system which many of his colleagues experimented with later.'⁷⁶

Commenting directly on Howells's harmonic style, Foss states that, as strong as it often was, "it never leaves the English soil for a moment." He continues:

It seems to fear the acid, or the dramatic, or the brutal; 'Sir Patrick Spens' is the best example of this, where the swirling of the waters sometimes comes to calm unexpectedly for lack of a violent-sounding chord I have long felt that Howells suffers in the quality of his composition from the very Englishness which is the loveliest thing in his third quartet, from the curious conditions of our musical life, from the very fact that he was not born in some country where he might have had a chance to develop his great gifts.⁷⁷

It is possible Howells considered a musical system based on numerical relationships and relative stylistic abstractedness as too restrictive for his unique creative process and principle. This is not to assess twelve tone as excessive, but rather as impractical for Howells's purposes. As it was, "Howells chose rather to fashion his own peculiar idiom from less radically changed tonal methods and more traditional inclined styles, but an

⁷⁴ Foss, 114.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 114.

⁷⁶ Hodgson, 183.

⁷⁷ Foss, 115.

idiom which would admit, when occasion demanded, sufficiently novel procedures and a considerable complexity of tonal relationship.”⁷⁸

Howells could attain high degrees of complexity in his music. This was done through his contrapuntal and harmonic procedures. Even within this intricate contrapuntal style, Howells “preferred to resolve all intervening ambiguities into final harmonic transparency and diatonic stability.”⁷⁹ Howells’s sense of resolution has resulted in cadences of exquisite horizontal and vertical blends; these rich progressions and cadences are found in the closing measures of: “A Spotless Rose,” “Blessed are the Dead,” “Like as the Hart Desireth the Waterbrooks,” “Take Him, Earth, for Cherishing,” the concluding pages of *Hymnus Paradisi*, and even in the madrigal part-song “Before Me, Careless Lying.”

Despite his lack of presence in the international circuit of composition, Howells’s career made him a formidable lecturer and teacher. Webber comments on Howells’s patient coaching of a new generation of composition students during the 1930’s and how he, “was also in demand nationwide as [a] skilled adjudicator and conductor at competitive events.”⁸⁰ “A prodigious procession of students has passed under Howells; tutelage, benefiting from the composer’s generous and perceptive educational influence.”⁸¹ Hodgson continues,

As a teacher he has been an inspiration to countless generations of young musicians; for he is a teacher in no ordinary sense. It would hardly be possible for any normally sensitive student to come into contact with him without feeling the presence of a rare and remarkable spirit, one who has been the close friend of

⁷⁸ Hodgson, 185.

⁷⁹ Hodgson, 185.

⁸⁰ Webber, 34.

⁸¹ Hodgson, 19.

many major literary and musical figures of his time from Rupert Brooke, and Walter de la Mare, to Elgar, and to Vaughan Williams.⁸²

For Howells, links to academics and religious rituals and observances superseded his engagement in secular composition. It is with the church rather than the concert hall that the name of Herbert Howells remains connected. In his long life, Herbert Howells achieved much; he nurtured and developed a new generation of composers and lastingly enriched the heritage of church music. “But it must be a matter for no little regret that his development into a “major” international force in wider circles, through the symphonic medium, never came about.”⁸³

CHAPTER 2. STYLISTIC FEATURES AND ANALYSIS

Key Stylistic Features Present in Early Works

Certain specifics of Howells’s choral style are identified as:

modality predominates over major/minor tonality, melody often sounds like plainchant, metrical accents are displaced, cross-relations abound, and moods frequently are funereal or ecstatic. Other characteristics include weak phrase endings, long-arched phrases, melismas as natural embellishments in the flow of the text, a fondness for nine-seven chords, mood creation, the manipulation of one inner voice against static harmony in others, and the reservation of wide melodic leaps for moments of great effect.⁸⁴

Oftentimes individual phrase endings are separated by a beat, and at other times they are separated by several measures, and often they meet only at the final bar line of the section or the piece.⁸⁵ These stylistic traits are prevalent and abundant in Howells’s early works.

⁸² Alan Ridout (a former pupil), Director of the Ashwell Festival, 1968, in a Program Note for a *Concert in honor of Herbert Howells*, July, 1968.

⁸³ Webber, 34.

⁸⁴ Carter, 12.

⁸⁵ Robert W. Lehman, “The Choral Idiom of Herbert Howells,” *Choral Journal* 33 (October 1992): 13.

This is the Howells that stepped into the musical spotlight in the second decade of the 20th century.

“Haec dies”, an acclamatory antiphon proper to Vespers of Easter Day, was composed in 1918 for Richard Terry and the choir at Westminster Cathedral. It was the last in a series of eight *a cappella* Latin pieces Howells wrote for the Cathedral between 1912 and 1920. Modally inflected harmony is prevalent, with the pitch center and key signature indicating G mixolydian. Apparent is Howells partiality for melody derived from plainsong as, over the length of ten measures, the soprano covers a span of a minor sixth in predominantly stepwise motion.⁸⁶

Figure 2



A common characteristic is his manipulation of one voice in the return of previously-stated material against static harmony in all other voices.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Carter, 12.

⁸⁷ Carter, 12.

Figure 3

The musical score for "Haec dies, mm. 80-82" is presented for five voices: Soprano I, Soprano II, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The time signature is 3/2, and the key signature has one sharp (F#). The Soprano parts (I and II) and the Alto and Tenor parts all sing the syllable "e" in the first measure, followed by a rest, and then "a." in the second measure. The Bass part begins with a rest in the first measure, then sings "Haec" in the second measure, "di" in the third measure, and "es," in the fourth measure. The lyrics "Haec di - es," are written below the Bass staff. The score includes measure numbers 80, 81, and 82 above the Soprano I staff.

Two uncharacteristic elements in “Haec dies” are the unchanging time signature of 3/2 for the entire 100 measures, and the lack of any significant counterpoint.⁸⁸

Another common feature in Howells’s music throughout his life is his emphasis on the anacrusis. Time and time again beginnings of phrases start on beat two or three rather than beat one. In the madrigal, “In youth is pleasure”, we can see the emphasis on the weak beats on reoccurring entries. It is, in fact, almost unusual for Howells to start a phrase on the downbeat especially in his choral repertoire.

⁸⁸ Carter, 13.

[illegible]

Figure 5

mp Non troppo lento, a sempre tranquillo.

Sing lullaby. Sing lullaby.

mp Sing lullaby. Sing lullaby.

mp Sing lullaby. Sing lullaby.

mf Sing lullaby. Sing lullaby.

Sing lullaby. Sing lullaby.

The first section of the piece is written in the Dorian mode (on F), and is akin to Vaughan Williams's *Pastoral Symphony*. The second section is more in the style of Delius as it is homophonic and introduces chromaticism and enharmonic modulation.⁸⁹

"A Spotless Rose" was written in 1919 and is one of Howells's most famous choral works. Hawes's "impressionistic counterpoint" and "half-hearted imitation" are at work here. From the beginning there is parallel motion in the choral lines and the recurrence of seventh chords. There is also imitation of plainsong.

Figure 6

A Spot-less Rose is blow-ing.

A Spot-less Rose is blow-ing.

A Spot-less Rose is blow-ing.

A Spot-less Rose is blow-ing.

A Spot-less Rose, mm. 1-2

Three other important aspects of Howells's style present themselves in "A Spotless Rose." Frequent metrical change; in the first seven measures Howells changes meter six times. The melody is made to fit the text in an elastic way, resulting in, "plainsong-like phrase-lengths of great smoothness and flexibility which lend the music a timeless quality akin to that of the fourteenth-century lyric from which the words are derived."⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Lehman, 14-15.

⁹⁰ Palmer, 74.

A second aspect is the rhythmic shifting of text in a single voice part. Later in his life Howells employed a sidelong skewing of individual lines of text (such as in his 1964, “Take him, Earth, for Cherishing”). In “A Spotless Rose” there is simple displacement of one line in a single vocal part and never more than one beat early or late. (Figure 6. Alto – m.1)

A third element is his use of a fermata on the rest in all four voice parts. Between the second and third stanza there is a change in texture, from soloist with chorus, to repeated material used in the first verse. The added pause sets the text apart with striking change.

“Blessed are the Dead” was written in the memory of Howells’s father, Oliver, one year after his death in September 1919. Though the manuscript is dated 1920 it was not completely finished. In 1995 the double choir anthem was finally published after being realized and edited by Patrick Russill. “Blessed are the Dead” is the first in a line of choral memorials followed by *Requiem* (1932), *Hymnus Paradisi* (1938), and “Take Him, Earth, for Cherishing” (1964). This work foreshadows many traits found in his latter memorials.

The opening four measures travel from E minor through C minor to G minor - a root movement of a third. Howells uses contextually unstable transitory chords in the last two beats of the first measure: a seventh chord in third inversion on beat three, and second inversion diminished chord on beat four.

Figure 7

Bless - ed are the dead which die in the Lord.

Bless - ed are the dead which die in the Lord.

Bless - ed are the dead which die in the Lord.

Bless - ed are the dead which die in the Lord.

Blessed Are the Dead, mm.1-4.

This type of transition is typical of Howells. Measure three illustrates both Howells's frequent use of triplets to heighten text, and the plainsong inflections in his modal lines. Also, in the middle section of the piece, Howells uses shifting of meter from 4/4 to 5/4 to 2/4 to heighten the meaning of the text as he does in his carol-anthem, "Sing Lullaby."

Weak phrase endings, another characteristic trend of Howells, also emerge in this anthem. Phrases frequently come to an end on the second or fourth beat of the measure, and an example can be found in the second soprano part wherein the textual terminus takes place on the fourth beat.

Figure 8

- while from their la - bours

Blessed Are the Dead, mm. 60-63

Although “Before me, careless lying,” was written within the same time frame as the carol anthems (1917-1919) and certainly after his “Elegy”(1917) it remains outside the realm of tonality we are accustomed to hearing from Howells.

Analysis of the Howells “Before me, Careless Lying”

“Before me, careless lying” is categorized as a ‘madrigal’ in Hodgson’s chronological conspectus of Howells’s works. It is one of two so described works, the other being “In youth is pleasure.” Both are five-part settings, and both won him awards. “In youth is pleasure” is a setting of words by Robert Wever and was dedicated to Sir Frederick Bridge and members of the Madrigal Society. Composed in 1915, it was awarded second prize by the Society. His second madrigal “Before me, careless lying,” was awarded first prize. It was composed on December 25, 1918.

Both pieces are written in an exceptionally pure Tudor style thus justifying the statement ‘outside the realm of tonality we are accustomed to hearing from Howells.’ Both deserve attention but for practical reasons the latter of the two will receive the attention in this investigation.

“Before me, careless lying” contains many of the aforementioned stylistic traits such as frequent meter changes, plainsong derived melodies, manipulation of one voice over static harmony of other voices, emphasis on the anacrusis, modality over major/minor, chromaticism, placement of fermatas and caesuras on rests and bar lines, weak phrase-endings, and the overall emphasis on ‘mood creation’ is ever present. It is a characteristically strong imitative polyphonic madrigal, linking it to composers such as Byrd, Weelkes, and Dowland.

Measures 26-29 display many of Howells's stylistic traits. For example; two time signatures (mm.26, 28); plainsong melodies in all parts (mm.26); caesura on the rest (mm.28); second syllable of 'treasures' falls on the upbeat, giving the phrase a weak ending (mm.27); next phrase 'His wallet's. . .' begins emphasizing the anacrusis in each part (mm.28-29); cadence itself is extended and contrapuntal (mm.26-27); rhythmic shifting of text (alto and tenor - mm.26); harmonically he places a major 7th chord on the fifth beat of measure 26 to illustrate his fondness of the raised 6th found in the Dorian mode.

Figure 9

pack of treasures. His wallet's

out his pack of treasures. His wal-

pack of treasures. His wal-let's

pack of treasures.

his pack of treasures.

Before me, careless lying, mm.26-29

The structure of "Before me, careless lying" follows that of the poem by Austin Dobson. It consists of four verses with the rhyme scheme for each verse as AABBCCB. Howells formats his musical structure as AABcAc. Since the forth verse is a hybrid of A+c we will call it Ac.

To distinguish one verse from the other, Howells applies a technique he uses in one of his carol anthems. Between stanzas three and four of “A Spotless rose” Howells sets the texture change from soloist with chorus to repeated material from the first verse by adding a pause on the rest in all four voice parts. In “Before me, careless lying” verses 1 and 2 are set apart with a caesura (quarter rest on beat 3 of m.28 - see figure 9). Verses 2 and 3 are divided with a fermata on the bar line (m. 56 - see figure 10), and verses 3 and 4 are set apart with a fermata (quarter rest on beat 3 of m.92 - see figure 11).

Figure 10

Figure 10 shows a musical score for measures 55 and 56 of the piece "Before me, Careless lying". The score is written for four voices: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The key signature is G major (one sharp, F#). The time signature is 3/4. Measure 55 shows the lyrics "fet - ters." for all voices. Measure 56 shows the lyrics "Nay, Child," for all voices. The music features a fermata on the bar line between measures 55 and 56. The dynamic marking *mp* (mezzo-piano) is present in measure 56.

Figure 11

Figure 11 shows a musical score for measures 91 and 92 of the piece "Before me, Careless lying". The score is written for four voices: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The key signature is G major (one sharp, F#). The time signature is 3/4. Measure 91 shows the lyrics "liev - ing!" for all voices. Measure 92 shows the lyrics "liev - ing!" for all voices. The music features a fermata on the bar line between measures 91 and 92. The dynamic marking *f* (forte) is present in measure 92.

The key signature indicates G major, but there is strong cause for D major as tonic as the closing measures of the third verse and the closing measures of the madrigal itself cadence and resolve to this key. In a more detailed analysis, the conclusion of the first phrase (m.6) ends on D major with the second phrase overlapping and beginning in the same key. However, the lack of the C# affirms the tonality of G major and in m.10, the VI chord of G is prepared by a secondary dominant.

8

soon the elf un - trea - sures His

soon the elf un - trea - sures His pack of pains and

soon the elf un - trea - sures His pack

the elf un - trea - sures His pack of

ware comes crying;

Before me, careless lying, mm. 8-11

Figure 13

13 14 15 16 17 18

pack of pains, of pains and plea - - - - - sures,

plea - - - - - sures,

of pains and plea - - - - - sures,

pains and plea - sures. His pack of pains and plea - sures,

His pack of pains of pains and plea - sures,

Before me, Careless lying, man 12-18

The last phrase of verse one starts with a burst of energy in its octave displaced entries, (another stylistic trait of Howells's are his large leaps to emphasize text) in the basses and the second sopranos. Our attention is directed to the top of the leap with the 'roguish eye' (m.19-21) and is highlighted as the first and second sopranos continue with this leap on 'bids me buy' oscillating their theme as the basses provide a pedal point in this preverbal "fa-la-la" section on G major. This G acts as a cadential 6/4 on C and as a dominant seventh on G. This sequence, with the words 'bids me buy' repeated several times in each voice part smashes into an F major sixth chord (first inversion) and a G chord (second inversion). The text 'bids me buy' is repeated to illustrate the Elf's (and the composer's) luring ability to entice the narrator's appetite for the 'treasures.'

Figure 14

With ro-guish eye, He bids me buy, bids me, bids me

With ro-guish eye, He bids me buy, He bids me buy, He bids me, bids me, bids me

With ro-guish eye He bids me buy, He bids me, bids me, bids me

With ro-guish eye He bids me, bids me, bids me, bids me

With ro-guish eye, He bids me buy, bids me, bids me

Before me, careless lying, man. 19-24

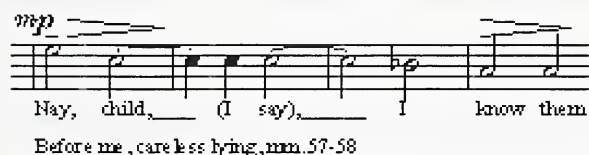
This phrase is brought to a close with one of Howells's characteristically long cadences (see figure 9). He increases the length of the measure by one half note, changing the time

signature from 4/4 to 3/2 (m.26-27). After tonicizing the C, he moves back to G as tonic, and swims through the progression as marked below to close off the first verse.

$\overset{\text{I}}{\text{IV}} - \overset{\text{I}}{\text{iii}} - \overset{\text{I}}{\text{ii}} - \overset{\text{I}}{\text{I}} - \overset{\text{Mm}}{\text{IV}} - \overset{\text{Mm}}{\text{V}} - \overset{\text{Mm}}{\text{I}}$

In “Before Me, Careless Lying” verses 1, 2 and most of 4 use very similar thematic material, and are almost exactly the same lengths (stanzas 1-4 are all 18 measures). All of verse 3 and the second half of verse 4 are very closely related. In fact the last 11 measures of verses 3 and 4 are musically almost identical (with some difference in texture and spelling of chords). Even the last 10 measures of verse 1 and the last 9 measures of verse 2 are almost identical. The only material not used more than once is the music set to verse 3 (section B), stanzas 1-4 (mm.56-81). Perhaps Howells chose to set this verse on its own because it assumes a speaking role (indicated by the bracketed ‘I say’).

Figure 15



The melodic movement and harmonic contour of the third verse (B section) is vastly different than that of the rest of the piece (A section). The initial motivic movement in each phrase of verse 1, 2 and 4 is upwards: stepwise rising fifth on the first phrase (figure 16); rising minor third passages on the line “His pack of pains (figure 17);” the octave leap on “With roguish eye (figure 18).”

Figure 16

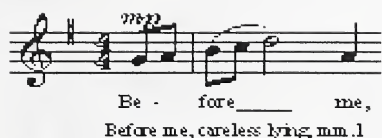


Figure 17

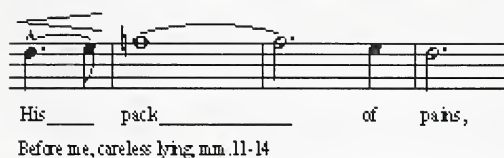
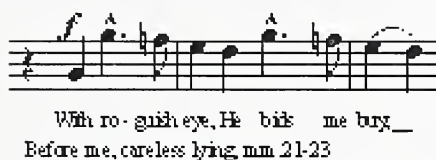


Figure 18



The melodic movement of the B section (verse 3) utilizes a descending third in all voices within the first two measures. Descending leaps of a fourth and a second are also used (see figure 19). Moreover, the descending entrances (m.56-m.63) are imitative throughout the voices which emphasize the mournfulness of the text “Nay, Child.” Howells also shifts from C major to C minor chords in his harmonic progressions, ensuing remorse.

Figure 19

56 *Piu espressivo mp*

mp Nay, Child, (I say), I

mp Nay, Child, (I say), I

mp Nay, Child, (I say), I know

mp Nay, Child, *mf* Nay, Child. I know

Before me, careless lying. mm. 56-59

The lines “There’s little need to shew them!” and “Too well for new believing I know their past deceiving” are written in perpetual descending motion (m.65-m.81) as the harmonic intensity increases. This is done through Howells’s sublime layering of voices as each part eventually sings some form of the line. Apparent here is Howells’s preference for long, plainsong-like phrases.

Figure 20

70 *f espress*

Too well for new be - liev - ing. I

75 know their past de - ceiv - ing

Before me, careless lying. mm. 70-78

Harmonically, measures 61-78 have moved to the key of B flat major, an upward modulation of a third.

Figure 21

Before me, care less lying, mm. 61-63

The movement of the third and the relatively high range with which Howells writes creates the impression that the speaker has had emotionally difficult past experiences with love. The last attempt of defense, against the temptation of love, on the line “I am too old (I say), and cold” (m.82) is a stunning depiction of old age in its doubt and fragility.

Figure 22

Before me, care less lying, mm. 82-86

Howells uses homophony on this line for the first time to represent the finality of this statement. The weight of the age is felt through the ‘tenuto’ markings on the words “I am too old” and the dynamic marking of pianissimo. The speaker’s belief in new love is frozen on the line “and cold today” (m.85) as Howells, on the word “cold,” uses an F minor chord, also for the first time (see figure 21).

The F minor chord is a glance into the mood that Howells can create. The type he creates here can be characterized as ‘elegiac,’ as the speaker’s love is frozen, or, more to the point, dead. Only the painful memory of the past exists. Similar musical material is repeated in measures 118 to the end. On the same harmonic progression to the F minor chord (mm.121) the text is now ‘sorrow.’

Figure 23

The image shows a musical score for five staves, likely representing different vocal parts or instruments. The music is in 4/4 time and D major. The first staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The second staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. The third staff has a bass clef and a key signature of one sharp. The fourth staff has a bass clef and a key signature of one sharp. The fifth staff has a bass clef and a key signature of one sharp. The lyrics are 'its sor - row, its' and 'Before me, care less lying, mm.120-122'. The music features a melodic line with a tenuto mark on the word 'sorrow' and a dynamic marking of *pp* (pianissimo).

At the end of the third verse is a transition to D major. Although a major key, we are not given closure to the troubles of the ‘old, non-believing lover.’ A sense of hope and renewal is mixed with sadness and even a touch of nostalgia. This provides some hope and resolution for the dwindling “believing” (m.91). The D major arrival in measure 91

allows for smooth transition to the G major beginning of verse 4 or the reprise of section A.

Figure 24

Figure 24 shows a musical score for measures 89-93. The score is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It includes lyrics for five parts: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass, and Piano. The lyrics are: "new be - liev - ing! But still the - day, for new be - liev - ing! But still new be - liev - ing! But still the new be - liev - ing! But still the new be - liev - ing! But still the". The score is marked "low 82" and "Tempo 1.".

Before me, care less lying, mm. 89-93

In the fourth verse the Elf continues his coaxing. The reprise of A is almost the same (with different text) except for measures 115 to the end. Measures 111-116 is almost exactly like 19-24 except for the marked difference in measure 115 (see figure 13). We are suddenly struck by a C minor chord in the second inversion instead of a C major chord. The alteration of the chord, E flat instead of E natural, occurs in the first soprano part. This is a direct glance back to the woes experienced in verse three and a warning of what is to come, for, just as in verse three, Howells uses the C minor chord in his harmonic progression.

Figure 25

Figure 25 is a musical score for a piece in 4/4 time, D major. It consists of five staves. The first staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "To buy his ware, to buy his ware, to buy, buy his ware". The second staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "buy his ware, to buy, to buy, buy his ware". The third staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "To buy his ware, to buy, buy his ware". The fourth staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "To buy his ware, to buy, to buy, buy his ware". The fifth staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "ware, to buy his ware, ware, buy, buy his ware". The score includes dynamic markings such as *mf* and *piano*. The piece ends with the lyrics "Before me, careless lying, mm. 112-117".

With slight thinning of the texture, the music from measures 118-128 is the same as measures 82-92 (see figure 21 and 22). The madrigal ends with a hint of irony. No one can escape the clutches of love, no matter his experience or age. The repetition of music from the closing of the elegiac third verse, with the dynamic marking of *pianissimo*, and finishing the piece in D major is an example of Howells creating ‘remoteness,’ or distance. We are looking back to past experiences and feelings and merging it with our current state.

As mentioned before, “Before me, careless lying” is outside the tonal realm we are accustomed to hearing with Howells. However, it does give us a great understanding of the many stylistic traits Howells crafted. It also gives us a sample of the ‘mood’ he can create. He uses the old form of the madrigal and combines it with his own ideas of colour and harmony.

What is unique about this madrigal and its sibling, "In youth is pleasure," is that they demonstrate Howells's stylistic traits so clearly. From the arrangement of notes on the page, their stresses and releases, the careful placement of rests, time signatures, accents, accidentals, well thought out intervallic motifs and structure to the type of mood presented -that of ecstasy and even remorse, or better yet, the impression of happiness within sorrow -we are given a clear understanding that Howells was a stylistically sound, individual and personal composer. Within "Before me, careless lying" can be found the embodiment of Howells's unique perspective on English music. The rolling hills of his native Gloucestershire and the archways of Westminster Cathedral may be difficult to hear and see in this work, but it is not so hard to hear the call of Tudor times mingling with a few centuries of modernism.

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